



Wikipedia and the politics of openness

Kevin Gotkin

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BOOK REVIEW

Wikipedia and the politics of openness, by N. Tkacz, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 232 pp., 5 halftones, 4 line drawings, US\$25.00 paperback, December 2014, ISBN: 9780226192307; US\$75.00 cloth, December 2014, ISBN: 9780226192277; US\$7-\$25 e-book, December 2014, ISBN: 9780226192444

Who has not heard Wikipedia offered as an example of something else? In many parts – if you have been in a communication studies classroom in the past decade, for example – Wikipedia has featured as a champion illustration of what digital media can do and what change they have wrought. Rarely cited as a complex artifact on its own, it is usually given as the ur-model of X, where X is usually something like ‘collaboration’ or ‘online participation’ or ‘ad-hocracy.’

In *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, Nathaniel Tkacz unpacks why and how Wikipedia enjoys this particular exemplar status. It is this kind of talk that tells a great deal about what Wikipedia is, even as it might obscure the way it actually works. The very title bespeaks one of Tkacz’s most important claims: that Wikipedia does not exist alone, that it is circumscribed by and spoken about (*Wikipedia and ...*) in a political logic of openness. In a thorough examination of the system of statements attendant to this concept of openness, Tkacz places Wikipedia in a long lineage of political–philosophical thought. The text’s capacity to locate Wikipedia’s specificity while sketching the whorl of concepts that orbit around it is a formidable achievement.

In order to show how Wikipedia can be its own subject *and also* attached in so many corners to a larger system of political thinking, he begins by stressing that openness is not pre-ordained or divinely given. In tracing discernible but often overlooking legacies, he finds that openness imports its own ideas about political formation and lends itself quite easily to an abstraction or assumed benevolence that covers over important nuance. In the end, Tkacz finds that openness is ‘bereft of content’ yet everywhere used to inform ‘a really existing practice’ (p. 35).

Chief among the key problems Tkacz works through in the book is his observation that ‘openness’ does not seem to solve the problems posed by the sub-concepts that exist under its umbrella, like ‘collaboration’ and ‘participation’. In fact, he later writes, ‘the open actively works against the development of a political language’ (pp. 32–33). He gives as one example that despite the number of times we hear that anyone with an Internet connection can edit Wikipedia, there were no guarantees a given edit would stick (and many do not). These fissures constitute a major divide Tkacz excavates between the way Wikipedia is talked about (indeed ‘an entire Weltanschauung’ (p. 3) or what he, following Foucauldian discourse analysis, calls a ‘statement formation’ (p. 40)) and the way it actually works in technical and organizational detail. This is due in large part because Wikipedia has been, in Tkacz’s estimation, ‘devoid of serious antagonism’ as a wide array of voices converge to lionize its way of working together as a solution to existing political formations (p. 7).

Many of the text’s chapters share a common structure, one that formally enacts this analytical dichotomy. Tkacz begins by surveying the literature of a key concept often used to understand Wikipedia (in chapter one, ‘openness’ itself; in chapter two, ‘collaboration’ and

‘participation’; and in chapter three, ‘ad-hocracy’) and then demonstrating the need for a closer examination of the artifact at the center of these ways of speaking. In one particularly enlightening sequence in chapter two, for example, Tkacz offers key cases that challenge the notion that collaborative work on Wikipedia is spontaneous, based on individual merit, and without durable hierarchies (p. 50). In both cases – one a debate about the deletion of an art installation staged on Wikipedia and one a debate about the inclusion of images of the prophet Muhammed – it is not spontaneous leadership or non-hierarchical labor that emerge to solve problems but a clear organizational structure for collaboration. Using discussion, talk, and mediation pages (all archives that tell some of the story about how the top-layer article page was created), Tkacz finds that the most ‘forceful statements’ are those that align themselves in closest proximity to the ‘political frames’ encoded in Wikipedia’s organizational documents. Both examples fall within the paradigm of ‘participation’ or ‘collaboration’ but exhaust their explanatory power by illustrating how exclusion and closure are in fact endemic to Wikipedia’s organization. Wikipedia is not collaborative because it has no hierarchies, but collaborative because it has policies that help absorb different perspectives into a single frame (p. 49).

Departing slightly from previous chapters’ structures, chapters four and five examine the political dimensions of forking, or the capacity for users discontent with an open project to remove themselves from the project and continue their own with the same underlying source code as the original. Tkacz looks closely at the 2002 Spanish Wikipedia fork, first in chapter four by describing how the fork happened on a technical level against the political significance often attributed to this form of exit or escape and then, in chapter five, by unpacking the discussion lists where a controversy about the potential for ads to be placed on Wikipedia initially caused the fork. While offering welcome details about the way controversies on Wikipedia play out, these chapters provide fewer insights than the first three. Fine-grained discussion of a number of sophisticated analytical frames takes these chapters on a bit of a detour from the central concerns that grounded and provided novel analysis in the early chapters.

Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness is like Dalí’s famous painting of his wife contemplating the Mediterranean Sea that, when viewed from 20 meters away, becomes a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Tkacz aims his analysis both at how Wikipedia works when you look at it up-close and how it morphs into something completely different when taken up as part of broad social changes involving digital media. The text’s use of canonic social theory is impressive (from Plato to Hobbes to Max Weber to Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek to Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Jean-François Lyotard, Alvin Toffler, among many others), especially so as Tkacz shows the ways Wikipedia is often proposed to be shaking up so much of what these bodies of theory proposed. Readers expecting an exhaustive granular look at Wikipedia will find instead a series of carefully chosen cases. Wikipedia becomes, in the end, a polestar in a constellation of statements about openness: both part of that formation and yet obscured in its specificity by the way it gets enrolled alongside proclamations about new social dynamics. A major success of this text is the way Tkacz de-particularizes the study of digital media, showing how long traditions of political and organizational thinking collide to become, as he describes, ‘isomorphic with’ network and software cultures of the last five decades. His expansive view of the field of social relations, paired with his insistence on the details of his object, offers readers both the global and selected granular ways of understanding Wikipedia.

Those interested in critical media studies might be particularly interested in the way he deals with the study of difference and inequity in relation to Wikipedia. In his introduction, Tkacz articulates a rather complex, if not fully developed, idea of difference with regard to the organizational and political theoretical angle from which he approaches Wikipedia. The

study of gender inequality among users, for example, can fall within his larger project of unearthing the ‘statement formation’ that is Wikipedia. The ‘more difficult task’, he says, will be to understand the ‘sorting of knowledge, categories, and statements’ that in turn have effects on identity and difference (p. 12). It would have been a welcome respite from the later chapters’ digression into theoretical nuance (the locating of ‘formal’ and ‘forensic materialities’ and ‘modal relations’ involved in forking, for example) to have seen this put to the test. Tkacz seems confident that vectors of difference, like gender or race, can be understood within his focus on the force and formation of statements, since all organizational politics are generative of difference. It is worth pausing on this theory of difference as epiphenomenal to organization and wondering if it might not constitute a kind of trend, in a moment characterized by a perceived stalling of identity politics scholarship, that finds identity vectors to be somehow smaller than ‘more difficult’ questions about statements in general.

This text is a fine example of new work in critical digital media studies. While perhaps too invested in the nuances of organizational, political, and discursive theories to be readable by undergraduates, it will be of great interest to those in new/digital media studies and science and technology studies. Tkacz renders Wikipedia as a strange object, despite how familiar the discourses of openness that swirl around it may seem. This duality, the text shows, tells us a lot more than about Wikipedia alone.

Kevin Gotkin

Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

 kgotkin@asc.upenn.edu

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